41 René Wellek

René Wellek (b. 1903) was born in Vienna, and emigrated to the United States after taking his Ph.D. at the University of Prague. He has taught at the universities of Princeton, Prague, London, and Iowa, and is now Sterling Professor of Comparative Literature at Yale. Professor Wellek's many publications include: *The Rise of English Literary History* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1941), *Theory of Literature*, with Austin Warren (New York, 1949), *A History of Modern Criticism 1750-1950*, 2 vols, (New Haven, 1955), and *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven, 1963), a collection of occasional essays from which 'Literary Theory, Criticism and History', first published in the *Sewanee Review* in 1960, is reprinted here.

As these titles suggest, René Wellek has always been interested in the study of literature as itself an object of study. He has been concerned to describe, order, and relate the different contexts, methods, and aims which may be involved in literary criticism and scholarship, always with a view to establishing common principles upon which literary criticism may proceed as a useful, responsible, and intellectually coherent enterprise. *Theory of Literature* described the achievements, problems, and possibilities of literary studies at a point in time when the New Criticism had firmly established itself in America, and it reflected the orthodoxies of that criticism without being narrowly bound by them. In 'Literary Theory, Criticism and History', written a decade later, Wellek discusses the revival of what had always been the main objection to the New Criticism—that it was antihistorical. Wellek's argument is that literary theory, literary criticism, and literary history are three distinct, though interdependent forms of inquiry which do not necessarily compete with each other; but his pluralism does not extend to conceding that all value judgments are relative, for this would condemn criticism to change without progress. Wellek's unhesitating, unapologetic commitment to the life of the mind, and his cosmopolitan range of reference, no doubt reflect his Central European cultural background.

CROSS REFERENCES: 18. John Crowe Ransom
25. Erich Auerbach
31. Northrop Frye
32. C. S. Lewis

Literary theory, criticism, and history

In *Theory of Literature*[1] I tried to maintain the distinctions between certain main branches of literary study. 'There is, first,' I said, 'the distinction between a view of literature as a simultaneous order and a view of literature which sees it primarily as a series of works arranged in a chronological order and as integral parts of the historical process. There is, then, the further distinction between the study of the principles and criteria of literature and the study of the concrete literary works of art, whether we study them in isolation or in chronological series.'

'Literary theory' is the study of the principles of literature, its categories, criteria, and the like, while the studies of concrete works of art are either 'literary criticism' (primarily static in approach) or 'literary history'. Of course, 'literary criticism' is frequently used in such a way as to include literary theory.[2] I pleaded for the necessity of a collaboration among the three disciplines: 'They implicate each other so thoroughly as to make inconceivable literary theory without criticism or history, or criticism without theory or history, or history without theory and criticism', and I concluded somewhate naïvely that 'these distinctions are fairly obvious and rather widely accepted' (pp. 30-1).

Since these pages were written many attempts have been made either to obliterate these distinctions or to make more or less totalitarian claims for some of these disciplines: either to say, e.g. that there is only history or only criticism or only theory or, at least, to reduce the triad to a duo, to say that there is only theory and history or only criticism and history. Much of this debate is purely verbal: a further example of the incredible confusion of tongues, the veritable Tower of Babel which seems to me one of the most ominous features of our civilization. It is not worth trying to disentangle these confusions if they do not point to actual issues. Terminological disagreements are inevitable, especially if we take into consideration the different associations and scope of such terms in the main European languages. For instance, the term *Literaturwissenschaft* has preserved in German its ancient meaning of systematic knowledge. But I would try to defend the English term 'literary theory' as preferable to 'science of literature', because 'science' in English has become limited to natural science and suggests an emulation of the methods and claims of the natural sciences which seems, for literary studies, both unwise and misleading. 'Literary scholarship' as a possible translation or alternative to 'Literaturwissenschaft' seems also inadvisable, as it seems to exclude criticism, evaluation, speculation. A

'scholar' has ceased to be so broad and wise a man as Emerson wanted the American scholar to be. Again, 'literary theory' is preferable to 'poetics', as, in English, the term 'poetry' is still usually restricted to verse and has not assumed the wide meaning of German *Dichtung* 'Poetics' seems to exclude the theory of such forms as the novel or the essay and it has also the handicap of suggesting prescriptive poetics: a set of principles obligatory for practising poets.

I do not want to trace at length the history of the term 'criticism' here, as it is properly the topic of the second essay. In English, the term criticism is often used to include literary theory and poetics. This usage is rare in German where the term *Literaturkritik* is usually understood in the very narrow sense of day-by-day reviewing. It might be interesting to show how this restriction has come about. In Germany, Lessing, certainly, and the Schlegels thought of themselves as literary critics, but apparently the overwhelming prestige of German philosophy, particularly the Hegelian system, combined with the establishment of a specialized literary historiography led to a sharp distinction between philosophical aesthetics and poetics on the one hand and scholarship on the other, while 'criticism' taken over by politically oriented journalism during the 'thirties of the nineteenth century became degraded to something purely practical, serving temporal ends. The critic becomes a middleman, a secretary, even a servant, of the public. In Germany, the late Werner Milch, in an essay 'Literaturkritik und Literaturgeschichte'[3] has tried to rescue the term by an argument in favour of 'literary criticism' as a specific art-form, a literary genre. Its distinguishing characteristic is that in criticism everything must be related to *us*, while in literary history, literature is conceived as involved in a period, judged only relatively to the period. The only criterion of criticism is personal feeling, experience, the magic German word: *Erlebnis*. But Milch hardly touches on the distinction between literary criticism and theory. He rejects a general 'science of literature', as all knowledge about literature has its place in history, and poetics cannot be divorced from historical relations.

I recognize that Milch's discussion raises interesting historical questions about the forms in which the insights of criticism have been conveyed, and that there is a real issue in the debate whether criticism is an art or a science (in the old, wide sense). I shall be content to say here that criticism has been conveyed in the most different art-forms, even in poems, such as those of Horace, Vida, and Pope, or in brief aphorisms, such as those by Friedrich Schlegel, or in abstractly, prosaically, even badly written treatises. The history of the 'literary review' (*Rezension*) as a genre raises historical and social questions, but it seems to me a mistake to identify 'criticism' with this one limited form. There still remains the problem of the relation between criticism and art. A feeling for art will enter into criticism: many critical forms require artistic skills of composition and style; imagination has its share in all knowledge and science. Still, I do not believe that the critic is an artist or that criticism is an art (in the strict modern sense). Its aim is intellectual cognition. It does not create a fictional imaginative world such as the world of music or poetry. Criticism is conceptual knowledge, or aims at such knowledge. It must ultimately aim at systematic knowledge about literature, at literary theory.

This point of view has recently been eloquently argued by Northrop Frye[a] in the 'Polemical Introduction' to his *Anatomy of Criticism*,[4] a work of literary theory which has been praised as the greatest book of criticism since Matthew Arnold. Frye, convincingly, rejects the view that literary theory and criticism are a kind of parasite on literature, that the critic is an artist *manqué* and postulates that 'criticism is a structure of thought and knowledge existing in its own right' (p. 5). I agree with his general enterprise, his belief in the necessity of a theory of literature. I want to argue here only against his attempt to erect literary theory into the uniquely worthwhile discipline and to expel criticism (in our sense of criticism of concrete works) from literary study. Frye makes a sharp distinction between, on the one hand, both 'literary theory' and 'genuine criticism', which progresses towards making the whole of literature intelligible, and, on the other hand, a kind of criticism which belongs only to the history of taste. Obviously Frye has little use for the 'public critic'—Sainte-Beuve, Hazlitt, Arnold, etc.—who represents the reading public and merely registers its prejudices. Frye laughs at 'the literary chit-chat which makes the reputations of poets boom and crash in an imaginary stock exchange. That wealthy investor, Mr Eliot, after dumping Milton on the market, is now buying him again; Donne has probably reached his peak and will begin to taper off; Tennyson may be in for a slight flutter but the Shelley stocks are still bearish' (p. 18). Frye is obviously right in ridiculing the 'whirligig of taste'; but he must be wrong in drawing the conclusion that 'as the history of taste has no organic connection with criticism, it can be easily separated'.

In my own *History of Modern Criticism* I have discovered that it cannot be done.[5] Frye's view that 'the study of literature can never be founded on value judgements', that the theory of literature is not directly concerned with value judgments, seems to me quite mistaken. He himself concedes that the 'critic will find soon, and constantly, that Milton is a more rewarding and suggestive poet to work with than Blackmore' (p. 25). Whatever his impatience with arbitrary literary opinions may be or with the game of rankings, I cannot see how such a divorce as he seems to advocate is feasible in practice. Literary theories, principles, criteria cannot be arrived at *in vacuo*: every critic in history has developed his theory in contact (as has Frye himself) with concrete works of art which he has had to select, interpret, analyse and, after all, to judge. The literary opinions, rankings, and judgments of a critic are buttressed, confirmed, developed by his theories, and the theories are drawn from, supported, illustrated, made concrete and plausible by works of art. The relegation, in Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, of concrete criticisms, judgments, evaluations to an arbitrary, irrational, and meaningless 'history of taste' seems to me as indefensible as the recent attempts to doubt the whole enterprise of literary theory and to absorb all literary study into history.

In the 'forties, during the heyday of the *New Criticism*[b], historical scholarship was on the defensive. Much was done to reassert the rights of criticism and

[a] See above, pp. 421–41.

[b] See the introductory notes on John Crowe Ransom (pp. 227–8 above) and Cleanth Brooks (pp. 291–2 above).

literary theory and to minimize the former overwhelming emphasis on biography and historical background. In the colleges a textbook, Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry*[6] (1938), was the signal for the change. I believe my own *Theory of Literature* (1949) was widely understood as an attack on 'extrinsic' methods, as a repudiation of 'literary history', though the book actually contains a final chapter on 'Literary History' which emphatically argues against the neglect of this discipline and provides a theory of a new, less external literary history. But in recent years the situation has become reversed, and criticism, literary theory, the whole task of interpreting and evaluating literature as a simultaneous order has been doubted and rejected. The New Criticism, and actually any criticism, is today on the defensive. One type of discussion moves on an empirical level as a wrangle about the interpretation of specific passages or poems. The theoretical issue is there put often in very sweeping and vague terms. A straw man is set up: the New Critic, who supposedly denies that a work of art can be illuminated by historical knowledge at all. It is then easy to show that poems have been misunderstood because the meaning of an obsolete word was missed or a historical or biographical allusion ignored or misread. But I do not believe that there ever was a single reputable 'New' critic who has taken the position imputed to him. The New Critics, it seems to me rightly, have argued that a literary work of art is a verbal structure of a certain coherence and wholeness, and that literary study had often become completely irrelevant to this total meaning, that it had moved all too often into external information about biography, social conditions, historical backgrounds, etc. But this argument of the New Critics did not mean and could not be conceived to mean a denial of the relevance of historical information for the business of poetic interpretation. Words have their history; genres and devices descend from a tradition; poems often refer to contemporary realities. Cleanth Brooks—surely a New Critic who has focused on the close reading of poetry—has, in a whole series of essays (mainly on seventeenth-century poems), shown very precisely some of the ways in which historical information may be necessary for the understanding of specific poems. In a discussion of Marvell's 'Horatian Ode',[7] Brooks constantly appeals to the historical situation for his interpretation, though he is rightly very careful to distinguish between the exact meaning of the poem and the presumed attitude of Marvell towards Cromwell and Charles I. He argues 'that the critic needs the help of the historian—all the help he can get', but insists that 'the poem has to be read as a poem—that what it "says" is a question for the critic to answer, and that no amount of historical evidence as such can finally determine what the poem says' (p. 155). This seems a conciliatory, sensible attitude which holds firmly to the critical point of view and still admits the auxiliary value of historical information, and does not of course deny the separate enterprise of literary history.

Usually, however, the defenders of the historical point of view are dissatisfied with such a concession. They remind us loudly that a literary work can be interpreted only in the light of history and that ignorance of history distorts a reading of the work. Thus Rosemond Tuve, in three very learned books,[8] has kept up a running battle against the modern readers of the metaphysical poets

and of Milton. But the issues debated by her are far from clear-cut conflicts between historical scholarship and modern criticism. For instance, in her attack on Empson's[a] reading of Herbert's 'Sacrifice',[9] she clearly has the upper hand not because she is a historian and Empson is a critic but because Empson is an arbitrary, wilful, fantastic reader of poetry who is unwilling or unable to look at his text as a whole but runs after all sorts of speculations and associations. 'All the Freudian stuff,' says Empson disarmingly, 'what fun!' He takes the line of Christ complaining, 'Man stole the fruit, but I must climb the tree', to mean that Christ is 'doing the stealing, that so far from sinless he is Prometheus and the criminal', that 'Christ is climbing upwards, like Jack on the Beanstalk, and taking his people with him back to Heaven'. Christ is 'evidently smaller than Man or at any rate than Eve, who could pluck the fruit without climbing... the son stealing from his father's orchard is a symbol of incest', etc. (p. 294). Miss Tuve seems right in insisting that 'I must climb the tree' means only 'I must ascend the cross', and that 'must' does not imply Christ's littleness or boyishness but refers to the command of God. Miss Tuve appeals, plausibly, to the concept of *figura*, of typology: Adam was considered as the type of Christ. Christ was the second Adam, the cross the other tree. Miss Tuve accumulates, in *A Reading of George Herbert*, a mass of learning to show that there are liturgical phrases, Middle English and Latin poems, devotional treatises, etc., which anticipate the general situation of Herbert's poem, and that even many details of the complaint of Christ can be found long before Herbert in texts Herbert probably had never seen as well as in texts he might have known or knew for certain as an Anglican priest. All this is useful and even impressive as a study of sources and conventions, but it surely does not prove what she apparently hopes to prove: that Herbert's poem is somehow unoriginal, that Empson is mistaken in speaking of 'Herbert's method' and its 'uniqueness'. Empson in his sly rejoinder[10] quite rightly argues that no amount of background study can solve the problem of poetic value. What is at issue is not a conflict between history and criticism but empirical questions about the correctness or incorrectness of certain interpretations. I think one must grant that Empson laid himself wide open to the charge of misreading but then one must say in his defence that nobody, literally nobody, had yet commented on that poem in any detail and that Empson's method, atomistic, associative, arbitrary as it is, is at least an ingenious attempt to come to grips with the problem of meaning. 'Close reading' has led to pedantries and aberrations, as have all the other methods of scholarship; but it is surely here to stay, as any branch of knowledge can advance and has advanced only by a careful, minute inspection of its objects, by putting things under the microscope even though general readers or even students and teachers may be often bored by the procedure.

But these debates, like the debate between the Chicago critics and the New Critics or between the Chicago critics and the mythographs,[b] concern rather

[a] William Empson—see above, pp. 146–57.

[b] For a note on the Chicago school of critics, see the Introductory Note on R. S. Crane, p. 592 below. By 'mythographs' Wellek presumably means critics, such as Maud Bodkin and Francis Fergusson in this Reader, who have used concepts and methods drawn from anthropology and Jungian psychology.

specific problems of interpretation than our wider debate about the relationship of theory, criticism, and history. Far greater and more difficult issues are raised by those who have genuinely embraced the creed of 'historicism', which after a long career in Germany and Italy, after its theoretical formulations by Dilthey, Windelband, Rickert, Max Weber, Troeltsch, Meinecke, and Croce, has finally reached the United States and has been embraced by literary scholars almost as a new religion. To give a characteristic recent example, Roy Harvey Pearce, in an article, 'Historicism Once More',[11]—strangely enough lauded and endorsed by J. C. Ransom—preaches a new historicism and concludes by quoting a poem by Robert Penn Warren with this climactic line, 'The World is real. It is there' (*Promises* 2).

Warren, hardly an enemy of the New Criticism, is quoted as the key witness for 'historicism', though his fine poem has nothing whatever to do with historicism and merely conveys, powerfully and movingly, a feeling for the reality of the past which might conceivably rather be called 'existential'. It asserts the kind of realization and wonder which Carlyle insisted upon in many of his later writings after he had repudiated his early adherence to German historicism. To quote Carlyle's examples: Dr Johnson actually told a street-walker, 'No, no, my girl, it won't do'; Charles I actually stayed the night in a hayloft with a peasant in 1651; King Lackland 'was verily there', at St Edmundsbury, and left '*tredecim sterlingii*, if nothing more, and did live and look in one way or the other, and a whole world was living and looking at him'.[12] But such wonder, appropriate to the poet or Carlyle, is only the beginning of historicism as a method or a philosophy. Pearce's historicism is a confused mixture of existentialism and historicism, a string of bombastic assertions about humanity, the possibility of literature, and so on, with the constant polemical refrain that 'criticism is a form of historical study' (p. 568). It is not worth trying to disentangle the hopeless muddles of Pearce's amazing stew of existence, eschatology, history, the 'creative ground of all values', the whole weird mixture of Rudolph Bultmann, Américo Castro, Kenneth Burke, and Walter J. Ong, S.J., all quoted on one page. It is better to turn to a knowledgeable and sophisticated upholder of the historistic creed such as my late colleague and friend, Erich Auerbach.[a]

In a review of my *History of Modern Criticism*[13] from which certain formulations passed, without explicit reference to my work, into the introduction of his posthumous book, *Literatursprache und Publikum in der lateinischen Spätantike und im Mittelalter* [*Literary Language and the Public in the late Classical and Middle Ages*],[14] and into his English article 'Vico's Contribution to Literary Criticism',[15] Auerbach states most clearly the historistic creed:

> Our historistic way of feeling and judging is so deeply rooted in us that we have ceased to be aware of it. We enjoy the art, the poetry and the music of many different peoples and periods with equal preparedness for understanding.... The variety of periods and civilizations no longer frightens us.... It is true that perspectivistic understanding fails as soon as political interests are at stake; but otherwise, especially in aesthetic matters, our historistic capacity of adaptation to the most various forms of beauty is almost bound-

[a] See above, pp. 315–32.

> less.... But the tendency to forget or to ignore historical perspectivism is widespread, and it is, especially among literary critics, connected with the prevailing antipathy to philology of the nineteenth-century type, this philology being considered as the embodiment and the result of historicism. Thus, many believe that historicism leads to antiquarian pedantry, to the overevaluation of biographical detail, to complete indifference to the values of the work of art; therefore to a complete lack of categories with which to judge, and finally to arbitrary eclecticism. [But] it is wrong to believe that historical relativism or perspectivism makes us incapable of evaluating and judging the work of art, that it leads to arbitrary eclecticism, and that we need, for judgment, fixed and absolute categories. Historicism is not eclecticism.... Each historian (we may also call him, with Vico's terminology, 'philologist') has to undertake this task for himself, since historical relativism has a twofold aspect: it concerns the understanding historian as well as the phenomena to be understood. This is an extreme relativism; but we should not fear it.... The historian does not become incapable of judging; he learns what judging means. Indeed, he will soon cease to judge by abstract and unhistorical categories; he even will cease to search for such categories of judgment. That general human quality, common to the most perfect works of the particular periods, which alone may provide for such categories, can be grasped only in its particular forms, or else as a dialectical process in history; its abstract essence cannot be expressed in exact significant terms. It is from the material itself that he will learn to extract the categories or concepts which he needs for describing and distinguishing the different phenomena. These concepts are not absolute; they are elastic and provisional, changeable with changing history. But they will be sufficient to enable us to discover what the different phenomena mean within their own period, and what they mean within the three thousand years of conscious literary human life we know of; and finally, what they mean to us, here and now. That is judgment enough; it may lead also to some understanding of what is common to all of these phenomena, but it would be difficult to express it otherwise than as a dialectical process in history....

This is an excellent statement, moderately phrased, concrete in its proposals, supported by the authority of a scholar who knew the relevant German tradition and had the experience of working within it. It contains, no doubt, a measure of truth which we all have to recognize, but still it rouses ultimate, insuperable misgivings, a final dissatisfaction with the 'extreme relativism' accepted here so resignedly and even complacently. Let me try to sort out some of the problems raised and marshal some answers to this influential point of view. Let me begin at the most abstract level: the assertion of the inevitable conditioning of the historian's own point of view, the recognition of one's own limited place in space and time, the relativism elaborated and emphasized by the 'sociology of knowledge', particularly by Karl Mannheim in *Ideologie und Utopie*.[16] This kind of relativism was and is extremely valuable as a method of investigating the hidden assumptions and biases of the investigator himself. But it surely can serve only as a general warning, as a kind of *memento mori*. As Isaiah Berlin observes, in a similar context:

> Such charges [of subjectiveness or relativity] resemble suggestions, sometimes casually advanced, that life is a dream. We protest that 'everything'

> cannot be a dream, for then, with nothing to contrast with dreams, the notion of a 'dream' loses all specific reference.... If everything is subjective or relative, nothing can be judged to be more so than anything else. If words like 'subjective' and 'relative', 'prejudiced' and 'biased', are terms not of comparison and contrast—do not imply the possibility of their own opposites, of 'objective' (or at least 'less subjective') or 'unbiased' (or at least 'less biased'), what meaning have they for us?[17]

The mere recognition of what A. O. Lovejoy has called, with a barbarous word formed on the analogy of the 'egocentric predicament', the 'presenticentric predicament'[18] does not get us anywhere: it merely raises the problem of all knowing; it leads only to universal scepticism, to theoretical paralysis. Actually the case of knowledge and even of historical knowledge is not that desperate. There are universal propositions in logic and mathematics such as two plus two equal four, there are universally valid ethical precepts, such, for instance, as that which condemns the massacre of innocent people, and there are many neutral true propositions concerning history and human affairs. There is a difference between the psychology of the investigator, his presumed bias, ideology, perspective, and the logical structure of his propositions. The genesis of a theory does not necessarily invalidate its truth. Men can correct their biases, criticize their presuppositions, rise above their temporal and local limitations, aim at objectivity, arrive at some knowledge and truth. The world may be dark and mysterious, but it is surely not completely unintelligible.

But the problems of literary study need not actually be approached in terms of this very general debate about the relativity of all knowledge or even the special difficulties of all historical knowledge. Literary study differs from historical study in having to deal not with documents but with monuments. A historian has to reconstruct a long-past event on the basis of eye-witness accounts, the literary student, on the other hand, has direct access to his object: the work of art. It is open to inspection whether it was written yesterday or three thousand years ago, while the battle of Marathon and even the battle of the Bulge have passed irrevocably. Only peripherally, in questions which have to do with biography or, say, the reconstruction of the Elizabethan playhouse, does the literary student have to rely on documents. He can examine his object, the work itself; he must understand, interpret, and evaluate it; he must, in short, be a critic in order to be a historian. The political or economic or social historian, no doubt, also selects his facts for their interest or importance, but the literary student is confronted with a special problem of value; his object, the work of art, is not only value-impregnated, but is itself a structure of values. Many attempts have been made to escape the inevitable consequences of this insight, to avoid the necessity not only of selection but of judgment, but all have failed and must, I think, fail unless we want to reduce literary study to a mere listing of books, to annals or a chronicle. There is nothing which can obviate the necessity of critical judgment, the need of aesthetic standards, just as there is nothing which can obviate the need of ethical or logical standards.

One widely used escape door leads nowhere: the assertion that we need not judge, but that we simply need adopt the criteria of the past: that we must re-

construct and apply the values of the period we are studying. I shall not merely argue that these standards cannot be reconstructed with certainty, that we are confronted with insurmountable difficulties if we want to be sure what Shakespeare intended by his plays and how he conceived them or what the Elizabethan audience understood by them. There are different schools of scholarship which try to get at this past meaning by different routes: E. E. Stoll believes in reconstructing stage conventions; Miss Tuve appeals to rhetorical training, or liturgical and iconographic traditions; others swear by the authority of the NED; still others, like J. Dover Wilson, think that 'the door to Shakespeare's workshop stands ajar' when they discover inconsistencies in punctuation or line arrangements from bibliographical evidence. Actually, in reconstructing the critical judgment of the past we appeal only to one criterion: that of contemporary success. But if we examine any literary history in the light of the actual opinions of the past we shall see that we do not admit and cannot admit the standards of the past. When we properly know the views of Englishmen about their contemporary literature, e.g. late in the eighteenth century, we may be in for some suprises: David Hume, for instance, thought Wilkie's *Epigoniad* comparable to Homer; Nathan Drake thought Cumberland's *Calvary* greater than Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Obviously, accepting contemporary evaluation requires our discriminating between a welter of opinions: who valued whom and why and when? Professor Geoffrey Barraclough, in a similar argument against historians who recommend that we should study 'the things that were important *then* rather than the things that are important *now*', advises them to look, for instance, at thirteenth-century chronicles: 'a dreary recital of miracles, tempests, comets, pestilences, calamities, and other wonderful things',[19] Clearly the standards of contemporaries cannot be binding on us, even if we could reconstruct them and find a common lowest denominator among their diversities. Nor can we simply divest ourselves of our individuality or the lessons we have learned from history. Asking us to interpret *Hamlet* only in terms of what the very hypothetical views of Shakespeare or his audience were is asking us to forget three hundred years of history. It prohibits us to use the insights of a Goethe or Coleridge, it impoverishes a work which has attracted and accumulated meanings in the course of history. But again this history itself, however instructive, cannot be binding on us: its authority is open to the same objections as the authority of the author's contemporaries. There is simply no way of avoiding judgment by us, by myself. Even the 'verdict of the ages' is only the accumulated judgment of other readers, critics, viewers, and even professors. The only truthful and right thing to do is to make this judgment as objective as possible, to do what every scientist and scholar does: to isolate his object, in our case, the literary work of art, to contemplate it intently, to analyse, to interpret, and finally to evaluate it by criteria derived from, verified by, buttressed by, as wide a knowledge, as close an observation, as keen a sensibility, as honest a judgment as we can command.

The old absolutism is untenable: the assumption of one eternal, narrowly defined standard had to be abandoned under the impact of our experience of the wide variety of art, but on the other hand, complete relativism is equally

untenable; it leads to paralysing scepticism, to an anarchy of values, to the acceptance of the old vicious maxim: *de gestibus non est disputandum.* ['there is no arguing about tastes']. The kind of period relativism recommended as a solution by Auerbach is no way out; it would split up the concept of art and poetry into innumerable fragments. Relativism in the sense of a denial of all objectivity is refuted by many arguments: by the parallel to ethics and science, by recognition that there are aesthetic as well as ethical imperatives and scientific truths. Our whole society is based on the assumption that we know what is just, and our science on the assumption that we know what is true. Our teaching of literature is actually also based on aesthetic imperatives, even if we feel less definitely bound by them and seem much more hesitant to bring these assumptions out into the open. The disaster of the 'humanities' as far as they are concerned with the arts and literature is due to their timidity in making the very same claims which are made in regard to law and truth. Actually we do make these claims when we teach *Hamlet* or *Paradise Lost* rather than Grace Metalious or, to name contemporaries of Shakespeare and Milton, Henry Glapthorne or Richard Blackmore. But we do so shamefully, apologetically, hesitatingly. There is, contrary to frequent assertions, a very wide agreement on the great classics: the main canon of literature. There is an insuperable gulf between really great art and very bad art: between say 'Lycidas' and a poem on the leading page of the *New York Times*, between Tolstoy's *Master and Man* and a story in *True Confessions*. Relativists always shirk the issue of thoroughly bad poetry. They like to move in the region of near-great art, where disputes among critics are most frequent, as works are valued for very different reasons. The more complex a work of art, the more diverse the structure of values it embodies, and hence the more difficult its interpretation, the greater the danger of ignoring one or the other aspect. But this does not mean that all interpretations are equally right, that there is no possibility of differentiating between them. There are utterly fantastic interpretations, partial, distorted interpretations. We may argue about Bradley's or Dover Wilson's or even Ernest Jones' interpretation of Hamlet: but we know that Hamlet was no woman in disguise. The concept of adequacy of interpretation leads clearly to the concept of the correctness of judgment. Evaluation grows out of understanding; correct evaluation out of correct understanding. There is a hierarchy of viewpoints implied in the very concept of adequacy of interpretation. Just as there is correct interpretation, at least as an ideal, so there is correct judgment, good judgment. Auerbach's relativistic argument that nowadays we enjoy the art of all ages and peoples: neolithic cave-paintings, Chinese landscapes, Negro masks, Gregorian chants, etc., should and can be turned against the relativists. It shows that there is a common feature in all art which we recognize today more clearly than in earlier ages. There is a common humanity which makes every art remote in time and place, and originally serving functions quite different from aesthetic contemplation, accessible and enjoyable to us. We have risen above the limitations of tradition Western taste—the parochialism and relativism of such taste—into a realm if not of absolute then of universal art. There is such a realm, and the various historical

manifestations are often far less historically limited in character than is assumed by historians interested mainly in making art serve a temporary social purpose and illuminate social history. Some Chinese or ancient Greek love lyrics on basic simple themes are hardly dateable in space or time except for their language. Even Auerbach, in spite of his radical relativism, has to admit 'some understanding of what is common to all of these phenomena' and grants that we do not adopt relativism when our political (that is ethical, vital) interests are at stake. Logic, ethics and, I believe, aesthetics cry aloud against a complete historicism which, one should emphasize, in men such as Auerbach, is still shored up by an inherited ideal of humanism and buttressed methodologically by an unconsciously held conceptual framework of grammatical, stylistic and *geistesgeschichtlich* [history-of-ideas] categories. In such radical versions as, e.g. George Boas' *A Primer for Critics*,[20] Bernard Heyl's *New Bearings in Esthetics and Art Criticism*,[21] or Wayne Shumaker's *Elements of Critical Theory*,[22] the theory leads to a dehumanization of the arts, to a paralysis of criticism, to a surrender of our primary concern for truth. The only way out is a carefully defined and refined absolutism, a recognition that 'the Absolute is in the relative, though not finally and fully in it'. This was the formula of Ernst Troeltsch, who struggled more than any other historian with the problem of historicism and came to the conclusion that 'historicism' must be superseded.[23]

We must return to the task of building a literary theory, a system of principles, a theory of values which will necessarily draw on the criticism of concrete works of art and will constantly invoke the assistance of literary history. But the three disciplines are and will remain distinct: history cannot absorb or replace theory, while theory should not even dream of absorbing history. André Malraux has spoken eloquently of the imaginary museum, the museum without walls, drawing on a world-wide acquaintance with the plastic arts. Surely in literature we are confronted with the same task as that of the art critic, or at least an analogous task: we can more directly and easily assemble our museum in a library but we are still faced with the walls and barriers of languages and historical forms of languages. Much of our work aims at breaking down these barriers, at demolishing these walls by translations, philological study, editing, comparative literature, or simply imaginative sympathy. Ultimately literature, like the plastic arts, like Malraux's voices of silence, is a chorus of voices—articulate throughout the ages—which asserts man's defiance of time and destiny, his victory over impermanence, relativity, and history.

Notes

1. René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York, 1949).
2. I have used the term thus widely in my *History of Modern Criticism* (New Haven, 1955).
3. *Germanisch-romanische Monatsschrift*, xviii, 1930, 1–15, reprinted in *Kleine Schriften zur Literatur- und Geistesgeschichte* (Heidelberg, 1957), pp. 9–24.
4. Princeton, 1957.
5. In his very generous review, Mr Frye apparently wished I had done so, cf. *Virginia Quarterly*, xxxii, 1956, 310–15.

6. Cleanth Brooks, Jr. and R. P. Warren, *Understanding Poetry; an Anthology for College Students* (New York, 1938).
7. 'Literary Criticism', in *English Institute Essays, 1946* (New York, 1947), pp. 127–58.
8. *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery* (Chicago, 1947); *A Reading of George Herbert* (Chicago, 1952); *Images and Themes in Five Poems by Milton* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957).
9. In William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London, 1930), pp. 286 ff.
10. *Kenyon Review*, xii, 1950, 735–8.
11. Ibid., xx, 1958, 554–91.
12. Carlyle, *Works*, Centenary edn. (London, 1898–9), *Essays*, iii, 54–6; *Past and Present*, p. 46.
13. *Romanische Forschungen*, lxii, 1956, 387–97.
14. Bern, 1958.
15. *Studia philologica et litteraria in honorem L. Spitzer*, ed. A. G. Hatcher and K. L. Selig (Bern, 1958), pp. 31–7.
16. Bonn, 1929, Eng. trans. London, 1936.
17. *Historical Inevitability* (Oxford, 1954), p. 61.
18. A. O. Lovejoy, 'Present standpoints and past history', *Journal of Philosophy*, xxxvi, 1939, 477–89.
19. *History in a Changing World* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1956), p. 22.
20. Baltimore, 1937 (renamed *Wingless Pegasus: A Handbook for Critics*, Baltimore, 1950).
21. New Haven, 1943.
22. Berkeley, 1952.
23. Cf. 'Historiography' in Hastings' *Encylopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vi (Edinburgh, 1913), 722.